

The lost art of the sales meeting-- most powerful management tool in the home improvement industry.

By Rodney Webb, The 91% Guy

Twenty years ago, the most successful home improvement companies—Pacesetter, Sears, Amri, had a sales meeting every day. In the past two years touring the country and speaking to thousands of home improvement sales reps, I've found that, today, most companies meet once a week, if that. What's more, those rare meetings are occupied primarily with operational issues—paperwork.

The attitude seems to be that once a salesman knows the features and benefits of his product, he's considered 'trained' and all he needs is an occasional motivational speech. It's as though an NFL team drafted a college all-star and told him to show up for the game and then for an hour on Wednesdays to discuss the pension plan. Such a team couldn't expect a winning season and such a company can't expect to close above 40%.

But there's hope for the old-fashioned training-based sales meeting. We've seen a growing number of companies go from one 'paperwork' sales meeting a week to three 'practice in pads' and boost their sustained close rate as much as 20 percentage points.

Why doesn't every company adopt *continuous* and rigorous training when the returns are so dramatic? Because many sales managers have built their sales careers on their own natural closing ability without fully understanding the principles. Like some gifted jazz players who can't read music, they're great performers but poor teachers. They haven't mastered the fundamentals that are at the heart of effective sales training. Without this foundation, they find it's far easier to skip the training meetings and insist that an actual sales call is the best training.

That attitude is wrong for two reasons: With lead cost skyrocketing, a home improvement company can't afford to give qualified leads to salesmen closing at less than 50% in the hope they'll get better with time.

And second:

Game time is not training time.

They say that, before every tournament, Tiger Woods sinks 100 three-foot puts in a row before he takes off his spikes. How many tournaments would Tiger have to play to equal the training value of those repeated strokes in close repetition, etching the movement into his muscle memory? Actual competition at a high level can hone skills to a fine edge but for mastering basic skills, there's no substitute for drill—repetition under the eye of a dedicated and demanding coach.

When a salesman makes a mistake at the kitchen table, the homeowner can't tell him what mistake he's made. All the homeowner can say is "No". When a salesman makes a mistake in role-play in front of a well-trained sales force, everybody in the room will tell him about it and the sales manager will guide him to an appropriate correction—a lesson that benefits everyone.

Selling skills vs. product knowledge.

Product presentation is an essential element in a good sales pitch, but if communicating product information was the pivotal factor, even the best closer could be replaced by a good video. To close above 50%, a good product presentation must be tailored to address the issues important to that particular homeowner—issues that are uncovered in a proper warm up. The art of laying the groundwork for a sale early in the appointment before the first hand sample is unwrapped is all together different from product knowledge. It takes

an understanding of the homeowner's frame of mind revealed by pointed transition questions—questions that are mastered by role-play and repetition. Once mastered, this understanding of the selling process allows a salesman selling windows with a 60% close rate to achieve a similar close rate with siding after only a few days of product training.

Constructive Pressure

The principles of one-call-close, in-home selling are like the basics of the game— it's a starting point. It's the blocking and tackling, the basic golf swing. Everyone who plays the game should know the basics. The super star is the athlete --or the salesman who makes 'the right moves' instinctively. That level of performance comes from practice under pressure. In the home improvement business, the most constructive pressure comes in delivering your presentation to a role-playing homeowner in front of other salesmen trained in the system. This kind of pressure instantly reveals where the presentation is weak. Everyone present learns how to spot problems and how to fix them.

Three-a-week Sales Meetings Deliver Big Gains.

Landis Construction is a thirty-year-old mid-western company doing about \$10 million in remodeling and home improvements, largely replacement windows, siding and gutter protection. Andy Landis, VP Sales, built a strong sales force of 16 salesmen who achieved a sustained, company-wide close rate of 47%. Andy's sales force is not only productive but very stable. In the last six years, virtually none of the salesmen he has trained has left for greener pastures.

Andy Landis had every reason to believe there was little room for improvement, but in January 2007, Andy rethought his approach to sales meetings. The results have been stunning.

Andy recalls that when he was participating in team sports, any successful team expected to practice four or five times a week. He figured training at that intensity could pay off in his business as well. “We were meeting once a week and most of those meetings were spent sharing sales experiences and thoughts about the competition,” Andy says.

“In January, we did a sales training seminar teaching Rodney Webb’s selling system. That seminar gave us the fundamentals, but it took a few weeks of practicing three times a week to convince our salesmen that the system could really make a big difference in their close rate and income. My best salesman, a ten-year veteran, had been closing at a respectable 51.9%. After three months of practice, he’s now closing at a sustained 69% and a number of our newer salesmen are approaching that level.”

“At our meetings, we have a lot of fun. One salesman will take the hot seat. He’ll begin his presentation while another takes the role of the homeowner. At any point in the presentation, I can direct another salesman to take over. This round robin approach keeps everybody keenly tuned in so they can take over without missing a beat.”

“As we’ve seen the results of practicing three times a week, enthusiasm has grown. Some of our salesmen now get together at home to drill each other.”

“We could have been satisfied with a respectable 49% close rate. Expectation is a powerful thing. We were good with one sales meeting a week. Now we’re meeting three times a week with the aim to be perfect.”